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Preventing Crime and Violence

U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Appropriations

Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies

Written Testimony of:

**Scott Smith**  
Prosecuting Attorney; Ohio County, WV

On Behalf of:  
**FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Scott Smith and I am the Prosecuting Attorney for Ohio County, West Virginia. I am also a member of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a national anti-crime organization of over 5,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, attorneys general, other law enforcement leaders, and victims of violence who have come together to take a hard-nosed look at the research about what really works to keep kids from becoming criminals.

As a prosecutor, I know that there is no substitute for tough law enforcement when it comes to keeping our communities safe. Across the country, law enforcement is busy arresting and prosecuting juvenile offenders, and the most dangerous of these youth are being locked up. The good news is that 60 percent of juveniles coming before a court for their first offense will not return to juvenile court again. Research tells us, however, that punishment alone is not always enough: among second-time offenders age 14 or younger, 77 percent will come back for a third court appearance.

Such high rates of recidivism are troubling; our country needs to do more to help at-risk youth. Fortunately, our experiences—and research—show that making targeted investments in kids can help by intervening effectively to prevent recidivism or by keeping them away from crime in the first place. Title II and Title V of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant (JABG), Juvenile Mentoring programs, and funding under the Second Chance Act provide needed support for such evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to reduce crime.

### **Keeping Kids Away From Crime**

Funding made available under Title V Local Delinquency Prevention Grants is the only federal funding source dedicated solely to the prevention of youth crime and violence. Communities can use these grants to fund a wide range of prevention programs including after-school activities, mentoring, tutoring, as well as initiatives to prevent school drop-outs, substance abuse, and gang activity. These grants are competitive, and require localities to match at least 50 percent of the grant funds with cash or in-kind contributions. To participate in the program, localities must engage in collaborative, comprehensive planning of needed community-based delinquency prevention efforts.

As mentioned before, Title V grants can fund after-school programs that help at-risk youth avoid criminal activity in the first place. The hours of 3:00pm – 6:00pm have been called the “prime time for juvenile crime,” and with good reason: currently, 14 million children lack proper adult supervision after school. These are the hours when juvenile crime soars and children are most likely to become victims of crime, be in a car accident, smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, or use drugs. Programs such as Boys & Girls Clubs connect children to caring adults and constructive activities during these critical hours. These investments have been shown by research to be effective in reducing delinquent behavior. Specifically, a comparison study found that housing projects without Boys & Girls Clubs had 50 percent more vandalism and scored 37 percent worse on drug activity than those served by the programs.

Like after-school programs, high-quality Juvenile Mentoring programs have been shown to help at-risk youth avoid criminal activity in the first place. For example, a study of Big Brothers Big Sisters found that young people who were randomly assigned to a Big Brother or Big Sister mentor were about half as likely to begin illegal drug use and nearly one-third less likely to hit someone compared to those who were assigned to a waiting list.

## **Effective Interventions to Reduce Recidivism**

JJDP Title II State Formula Grants and the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant (JABG) can fund several proven crime-reducing therapeutic interventions for kids who have already gotten into trouble. One such intervention is Multisystemic Therapy (MST). MST targets kids who are serious juvenile offenders by addressing the multiple factors related to delinquency in their peer, school, neighborhood, and family environments. One study of MST found juvenile offenders who had not received MST were 62 percent more likely to have been arrested for an offense, and more than twice as likely to be arrested for a violent offense. MST also saved the public an average of \$5 for every \$1 invested. Another intervention, Functional Family Therapy (FFT), works to engage and motivate youth and their families to change behaviors that often lead to criminal activity. In one evaluation, youth whose families received FFT were found to be half as likely to be re-arrested as those whose families did not. Further, FFT was found to save the public \$50,000 per youth treated.

The new proposed Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program can help fund place-based innovative, evidence-based approaches that help troubled youth stay on track. For example, a combination of intensive police supervision, expedited sanctions for repeated violence, community pressure, and expedited access to jobs, drug treatment, or other services—a carrot-and-stick approach—has shown in a number of cities that it can cut homicides by violent offenders in high crime neighborhoods. One study comparing two Chicago neighborhoods—one employing the carrot-and-stick approach and one that did not—found that in the carrot-and-stick area there was a 37 percent drop in quarterly homicide rates, while the decline in the other neighborhood during the same period was only 18 percent.

## **Effective Reentry Approaches to Reduce Recidivism**

Each year, approximately 100,000 juveniles leave correctional facilities nationwide. Juveniles released from confinement still have their likely ‘prime crime years’ ahead of them, and unsuccessful transitions back into communities result in an alarmingly high recidivism rate of 55-75 percent for juvenile offenders. Effective reentry programs help reduce recidivism rates by providing support and resources to guide ex-offenders through a successful transition back to community life. One effective, research-based program with a strong reentry component is Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC). MTFC provides services to youth and their families during and after a youth’s out-of-home placement, ongoing supervision by a program case manager, and frequent contact and coordination of services with the youth’s parole/probation officer, teachers, work supervisors, and other involved adults. In studies, MTFC has been shown to cut juvenile recidivism in half and saves the public an average of \$89,000 for every juvenile treated.

The bipartisan Second Chance Act can support effective reentry efforts, including programs like MTFC. The Second Chance Act authorizes assistance to states and localities to develop and implement strategic plans for comprehensive efforts to enable ex-offenders to successfully reenter their communities such as: family reunification, job training, education, housing, and substance abuse and mental health services.

## **Overwhelming Unmet Needs**

Unfortunately, the evidence-based prevention and intervention programs for young people – which we know to be effective in reducing crime – remain woefully underfunded. For example, Title II State Formula Grants, Title V Local Delinquency Prevention grants, and JABG have yet to recover from funding cuts in the years since FY 2002. Currently, there are approximately 400,000 juvenile offenders

on probation and 150,000 eligible for out-of-home placement. Unfortunately, only about 35,000 of them receive MST, MTFC, and FFT. Juvenile Mentoring funds, while increased since FY 2002, fall far short of meeting the needs of at-risk and troubled youth.

**I urge you to restore funding for Title II State Formula Grants to \$89 million, Title V Local Delinquency Prevention Grants to \$95 million, and Juvenile Accountability Block Grants to \$250 million, levels appropriated by Congress in 2002, before the cuts of subsequent years. I urge you to fund the new proposed Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program at \$40 million.**

**I also urge you to fully fund programs authorized by the Second Chance Act, including funding for the Adult and Juvenile Offender State and Local Reentry Demonstration Projects at the authorized amount of \$55 million.**

**Finally, I urge you to maintain at least the FY 2010 funding level of \$100 million for Juvenile Mentoring this year.**

### **Youth-Focused Violence Prevention and Intervention Research**

**In addition to increased funding for programs funded under JJDP, JABG, and the Second Chance Act, I urge you to set aside at least 30 percent of NIJ research funding for rigorous scientific evaluation of youth-focused violence prevention and intervention approaches.** This set-aside should fund randomized control trials and rigorous comparison group studies of youth-focused violence prevention and intervention approaches, with a specific focus on community-based approaches that serve the most at-risk populations.

A set-aside for NIJ-funded research that focuses on what works with youth is needed for four reasons. First, 18 to 21-year-olds account for a greater percentage of crime than any other four-year age group. Therefore, we should increase research investments to identify programs that really work to help keep at-risk kids on the right track and to reduce recidivism among juvenile offenders before they hit the “prime crime years” of 18-21. Second, brain development research shows that adolescence is a crucial period in the development of one’s reasoning and judgment. We need to better understand which interventions with troubled adolescents can best enable them to develop the reasoning and skills that will turn them away from criminal activity. Third, we also know from the research that there are programs and approaches that are effective with adults but not as effective with juveniles (e.g., drug courts), and vice versa; therefore, any research that does not specifically focus on youth can not be presumed to be applicable to youth. Finally, there are many promising, but currently untested, approaches to youth and gang crime prevention and intervention. Increased federal attention on youth-focused violence prevention and intervention research would help us learn even more than we know now about how to effectively reduce juvenile crime.

Law enforcement leaders’ commitment to putting dangerous criminals in jail must be matched by a commitment from Congress to fund investments in kids that help prevent them from becoming criminals. On behalf of my fellow law enforcement leaders around the country who, like me, are members of FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS, I urge you to work with us increase our nation’s investments in these proven crime-prevention strategies that improve outcomes for kids, and save lives and taxpayer dollars.

Thank you again for this opportunity to present this testimony.